

Why do I keep repeating myself? Kristin Lucas

Felix: Voyerism, 2, 2 (1999)

This article was written in response to a series of conversations with Joe McKay (artist) and Jan Zwicky (philosopher) for *Felix*, a video art journal.

Each day we step through an exercise in watching: waiting for, imagining, sifting through, and absorbing for the sake of entertainment or information. Are we aware how much our behavior is related to what we see? Are we aware that what we see effects how we behave?

Because of the integration of computers into our lifestyles, we are more likely than ever to be following paths that have been predetermined for us (turn on computer, use pull down menu, double click on icon,...). We have management down to a fine craft, measuring the time between steps, creating aliases on our desktops to eliminate as many steps from our routine as possible. How does this effect our behavior outside of the computer interface?

I know exactly where to position myself on the subway platform so that when I enter and exit the subway car, I wind up directly in front of the turnstile for a swift getaway. Economization of time and energy.

Lately I have taken notice of the many fields that I pass through in a day, the interferences and transmissions that effect my stream of consciousness. How much am I effected by these signals, subliminally, curiously physically? I have walked home enough times, down the same path, that turns go unnoticed, as if I have turned over the controls and am operating on autopilot. Who is in control now? What are the sources of influence that play out upon my body at this time? As I loosen my grip, do I increase my vulnerability to outside forces?

I wonder what the odds are for a mobile phone or a fax to share the same frequency as a neurotransmitter within my brain. A pager goes off and I raise a brow. Someone programs their microwave to thaw frozen peas and I wind up exiting the subway two stops too soon. I'm a giant radio-controllable buffoon.

Because this I live in the United States, I am exposed to machine interface everyday: bank machines, automated telephone services, voice mail. Even this amount of interaction effects my behavior and this directly relates to the way I see.

Imagine the spheres of influence being played out on those whose lives are even further steeped in electronic co-dependency, from programmable security systems to GPS (Global Positioning Systems) on a daily basis. With so many systems in place one must proceed in accordance with the commands and options of machines to accomplish the most rudimentary of chores. Rewards may seem small: the cash equivalent of the value submitted, a printed receipt, a potato baked evenly from the inside out. Nevertheless they are achievements and to some they are empowering.

There is an Aaron Spelling primetime TV show this season called Charmed featuring Shannon Dougherty formerly of Beverly Hills 90210. Its stars are a sisterhood of witches who cast spells with their minds but use cell phones to communicate. Those conditions, generated by the collision of waveforms and forces, are commonly mistaken for the actions of the paranormal or a warp in the time space continuum of a

parallel universe. Maybe cell phones are capable of effecting the psychic and paranormal. Wo/man-machine interface.

I play video poker with the same degree of intensity that I enlist to make art. Casinos are easy environments to work in because they are controlled environments. You can expect the same light, temperature, and noise level regardless of the time of day. There are no competing noisemakers: video cameras, laptops, or walkman, allowed in the room. I stare deep into the face of my machine--to the point that unidentified glands begin to secrete--causing my vision to blur. I employ my deepest psychic capabilities to free all energy blocks between the machine and myself. Machine karma.

Wo/man becomes to machine what peripheral is to computer...an extension for the facilitation of the 'perfect' task-oriented machine. As a culture we have invested in this relationship. Chips and compression are central to 90's electronics design. Smaller often costs more. Miniaturization is fashionable. The shorter the life of these accessories the better, we'll just buy more and reprogram ourselves.

Canal Street, in lower Manhattan, is one of my favorite places to shop. It was once notorious for its thriving do-it-yourself electronics stores, owing its reputation to a project-oriented group of experimental artists and engineers. These stores have long been replaced by cheap electronics store, selling Tama-guchi pets, dancing potted plants, pens and watches that talk, and car alarms at bargain prices.

Many components that one used to solder onto PC board are no longer being made. Information in the form of data is more commonly compressed and transferred to programmable chip. Parts are miniaturized, stamped onto boards, and dipped in solder by robots and machines. The chip in effect reduces and seals information in such a way that can prevent modification, as a measure of security. Most electronics enthusiasts have had to trade in their breadboards for computers and turn to software programs to work out schematics.

The computer industry keeps itself in business by using compression as a tool for 'information hiding', which ultimately puts a broadening user group in the dark, securing the user's position as laborer of the machine. Language is turned into property. There is market that assumes our ignorance. Perhaps this is why Dummies Guide... paperbacks are so popular among users. "I'd like to buy a vowel please." (Wheel of Fortune, TV game show slogan) Commercial propagandists lead us to believe that we are taking record-setting strides forward in the race for the 21st century, but are we really just being taken for a ride.

Is 'information hiding' in digital society being used as a form of social control? It is packaged and sold to the general public like insurance, as security. We operate within a self-censoring system, which surpasses those of generations before. Surveillance is so much a part of our lives that we don't need to see it to recognize its presence. A camera at a bank machine is a merely interior decoration. Objects and procedures are never what they appear to be, but we accept that information at face value. We live with the knowledge that our own image can be bought and sold and our identities and actions misconstrued. This effects our behavior, the way we socialize on the street, in our workplace or home, on the Internet. When subscribing to an on-line magazine, my private information is being sold to a sales analyst for product research purposes. When I wake up in the morning or when I come home for the day, my initial activity via telephone or modem sets off an onslaught of calls by telemarketers soliciting anything from phone service, credit card offers, and car insurance. It took me some time to witness this pattern among patterns.

Not only do we find ourselves mimicking this process of 'information hiding' by censoring our thoughts and gestures in real time, but also we facilitate the paradigm, which enables others to construct our individual and collective identities. We contribute to the paradigm that systematically hides information from us.

There exists in a producer's mind, the notion that the viewer/audience will receive information and process that information based on parts given. As a mediamaker you set up the shot. The audience looks through your lens. You provide the framework for their observation.

I have adopted a frame of vision, which is different than the cone of vision that I learned about in junior high school science class. This frame serves as a filter through which I am able to identify and classify, weed out the odd and unnecessary bits of information that might otherwise cloud my judgement. Somewhere along the line I downloaded pattern recognition software for my brain. There are days that I forget what it feels like to have invented my own thoughts. I spend more time organizing my desktop than I spend organizing my desktop.

As video and computer animation become more prevalent, and we see our own images reproduced more often, we venture further into the illusion that the reproduction is the truer self and become increasingly more fascinated with self-improvement and super-human qualities. We are becoming more familiar with the images that are produced this way. When contemplating our image in video, we witness an emptiness, a hollowness. Our instinct is to reach for the refresh button.

Because of the vast databases full of prerecorded material: sound, images, text, our audiences are less impressed by the perfect or live moment, and more so by the spectacle of the moment.

Take for example the popularity of television talk shows. The average viewer has a sophisticated awareness of the complexity of the information and actions that are being staged. The stage becomes the canvas for experience. The viewer already knows that the experience has been rehearsed. This makes the story that much easier to absorb. Its parts are familiar. It is not that the story itself is sad to listen to. It is that the producers have broken the story into sound and emotive bytes that are easily reconstructed for the audience. The guest has come to the camera to have the experience. To measure the empathy passed down through audience participation. The story is made for the audience, and the attachment comes out of an appreciation for a well told story. The story does not have the same kind resonance without undergoing the reconstruction. The camera acts as the interface between the viewer and the guest.

We are living in the age of pre-recorded samples and behaviors. The digital age issues arguments over reproduction and multiplicity. Cracking DNA code and In vitro fertilization are intrinsically linked to this. The assumption that we can all have children is the same as the promise of the digital; we will be guaranteed a one to one transfer.

Digital media breeds multiplicity. The more dandelions you pull from the lawn, the greater the number that grow back in their place. In a few short years, not-so-talented and celebrated preteen quintuplets will replace televisions "The Olson Twins". Soon we'll be happy to sit back and digest hours of the same scenarios that the Brady Bunch and Full House cast played out. The difference being character development and separation anxiety stepped up to the 5th power, quintuples instead of twins. Multiplicity gone haywire.

So how does one reconcile using digital technology: video, computers, or the Internet as an art medium when they are intrinsically related to the facilitation of the information as industry, language as property? How does one reclaim these tools? These are the questions that surface in my art-making practice.

I make video as if I was conditioning myself for something major. Like nuclear fallout. Video and computers have an intrinsic relationship to mass media and military, as tools. Therein lies potential for the critique of these structures. Video is the medium within which I simulate possible relationships/maneuvers. It's borderline competitive for me, breaking free of the object that encapsulates

me. I concentrate on the fields that I operate within, and those that surround me. I am exposed to more fields than I care to acknowledge. I have chosen to make work about this, but this does not mean that others will or that my ideas are meaningful or truthful with research to back them up. I just simulate the environment, real and imagined, to get to the question.

Whether analog or digital, many forms of information can merge with video. It can be captured or streamed for web pages and live webcasts. This is changing the way that one perceives video as a medium. Because video is so compatible with other tools, and so malleable at the same time, it is a tool that many are fascinated with. It has the ability to capture the qualities of layers of light and sound. This is stunning to me still. I am used to operating within fields and behind layers. It is important to me to imagine the big picture. I see walls around me and I know that there are other spaces. I see windows and I envision a number of options. Our reality has more depth than ever due to digital technology.